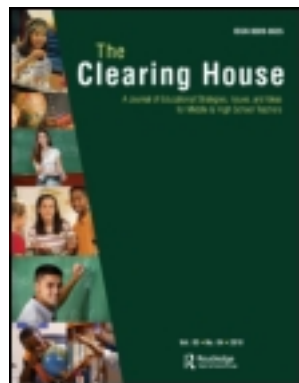


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# Creating Safe Learning Environments for At-Risk Students in Urban Schools

SHONTA M. SMITH

**Abstract:** This article shows that students tend to prosper in safe learning environments and that stakeholders are disturbed by the number of at-risk students that are being suspended and expelled from urban schools. The suspensions and expulsions result from repeated offenses, including disrespect and insubordination, gang fights, and possession of illegal narcotics and weapons charges, to name only a few. If at-risk students are not safe, we cannot soberly expect them to prosper and learn. Accordingly, stakeholders must work collectively to change this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** school safety, at-risk students, urban schools

When one thinks of unsafe high schools, particularly unsafe urban high schools, a variety of issues come to mind. Urban school systems exist in a category by themselves. Indeed, the characteristics that plague urban school systems defy common imagination.

When one enters most contemporary American urban high schools, one is greeted by a security guard or a police officer as well as a metal detector. That encounter alone can lead one to believe that some safety concerns and issues are present and need to be addressed. Imagine the experience of the students who enter such a building each and every day. Upon doing so, it becomes hard to be convinced that these students feel safe or even know what safety is.

If one takes a trip down the highway to the nearest suburban high school, the experience will hardly be the same as what was experienced in the urban school. The exterior features of the building are likely to be pleasing to the eye. The grass might be a deep dark green color, and the landscape might very well be of the highest caliber. We will not walk through metal detectors, nor will

security guards greet us at the door. Quite the contrary, the experience is both pleasing and welcoming.

Unlike the description of the urban high school, the description of the suburban high school does not leave the impression that the school is unsafe. To be sure, both urban and suburban high schools deal with safety concerns, but urban high schools tend to experience a greater number of incidents at a more distressing level.

This description of urban high school systems is similar to the one in Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities*. Kozol (1992) provides detailed descriptions of not only inequalities in urban schools but also unsafe conditions. For example, one school is full of sewer water and its doors are locked with chains (35). "Four of the six toilets do not work. The toilet stalls, which are eaten away by red and brown corrosion, have no doors. The toilets have no seats. One has a rotted wooden stump. There are no paper towels and no soap" (36). In addition, windows covered with steel grates can make for a sinister sight.

When we hear the words "school safety," thoughts of violence may spring to mind. It is important to understand, however, that the aforementioned descriptions of urban high schools represent forms of violence, just not immediate interpersonal violence. Even though these volatile experiences are not conducive to teaching and learning, we have yet to begin the process of linking them to the rates of physical and social aggression that exist in urban schools.

The link is hardly difficult to make. Upon approaching such an institution, one may see that its windows are old and outdated and they may be covered with steel grates or bars with peeling paint; the school may be on a trash-lined street with unkempt grass and landscaping (Kozol 1992). A seemingly sourceless stench hangs in

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the air. The surrounding atmosphere is one of gloom. Within such a space, one is challenged to form a sense of direction let alone goals and expectations. Living day-to-day is easier. However, the bare, inescapable fact is that when one walks through the door to such a place, one is in school. This fact endures despite teachers being cursed at, students being bullied, classmates being slapped, and the principal being jumped by the neighborhood gang. Amid such a backdrop, students are still expected to engage in learning.

We must explore strategies and techniques that can be used to help create safe learning environments for at-risk students. Moreover, we must look at how staff, parents, and students can work together to decrease the number of safety violations.

The mantra "One Team, One Goal, One Band, One Sound" represents a key effort when it comes to involving all stakeholders in the educational process. Everyone has a common interest and understands the overall goals and objectives. The stakeholders work together as a unit and do what is in the best interest of the team. Indeed, ensuring school safety is a collaborative effort. That collaboration calls for home (parents), school, and community working as a single collective entity. As an entity, such forces can work to provide better opportunities for students while at the same time create a safe environment that is conducive to teaching and learning. Effective schools actively involve parents and other members of the community in redesigning schools to better meet the needs of children placed at-risk (Kauchak and Eggen 2008).

### At-Risk Students

When working with at-risk students, schools must use a comprehensive approach. Such a comprehensive approach focuses on the students' physical, social, emotional, and academic growth in integrated efforts (Kauchak and Eggen 2008).

Urban school systems have an abundance of students placed at-risk, and at-risk students experience a number of educational problems that lead to safety concerns. The educational problems vary. These students display a lack of interest in school and often have poor attendance and low standardized test scores. Additionally, they tend to have a low socioeconomic status, live in urban environments, be transient, and represent non-native English speakers and minority groups. According to Kauchak and Eggen (2008), students placed at-risk are in danger of failing to exit their education bearing the skills necessary to survive in modern society.

If at-risk students cannot survive in modern society, then it is feasible for them to rely on coping mechanisms that work for them. Such mechanisms may cause these students to engage in behavioral practices that pose safety concerns in schools, such as fighting, bullying, and degrading each other with negative words, to

name but a few examples. At-risk students may utilize these mechanisms not only to cope but also to mask learning deficits and low self-esteem issues.

Again, it is pertinent that schools work with parents, staff, and community members to create safe learning environments. In order to make learning environments safe, schools must first address the issues that cause them to be unsafe.

A multitude of factors and variables contribute to unsafe learning environments. These factors have the greatest impact on the lives of the at-risk students; however, until the parents, school, and community become involved and work together to minimize these influential factors, at-risk students will continue to be marginalized. Since school safety is everyone's concern, it must be everyone's responsibility.

In general, at-risk students require guidance and support. They tend not to participate in school activities and have minimal identifications with school (Donnelly 1987). If these students do not identify with school, then they will not be inclined to identify with the policies and procedures instituted at the school. Therefore, it is urgently necessary for schools to find ways to effectively work with their student populations. Once schools engage at-risk students, these students will feel like they are members of the school community and be better positioned to slowly begin to identify with the school culture.

### Urban Culture

It may appear that urban culture leans toward aggressiveness. If urban culture is perceived to be aggressive, then the students (normally labeled as at-risk) that live in such communities and attend urban schools may appear to be aggressive. Presuming the appearance coincides with the reality, it is worth exploring what causes such aggression. Naturally, if at-risk students are perceived as being aggressive in the community, then the perception of them being aggressive at school will exist by extension. It then appears that the students' culture and the school's culture are interdependent entities.

At-risk students living in urban environments deal with pressures from gang violence, drugs and alcohol, domestic conflicts, and depression (Beachum and McCray 2004). From the at-risk students' point of view, however, the school culture neither understands nor desires to understand their culture. This causes the at-risk students to feel a sense of alienation within the school culture. Simply stated, it seems as though no one from the school's culture can identify with them. This makes for a cultural collision that results in emotional turmoil, and the net outcome is that the school is left to determine how to make its own culture become part of the students' culture.

Several definitions of school culture exist. Across the board, it is viewed as the norms, attitudes, beliefs,

rituals, ceremonies, and relationships of individual stakeholders (Deal and Peterson 2009). The school culture sets the tone because it determines how the stakeholders (parents, school staff, students, and school community) conduct themselves and interact with one another. As has been acknowledged, in urban high schools, oftentimes negative undertones and aggressive behaviors become the norm. As a legitimized norm, this negative behavior is viewed as acceptable and sometimes results in behaviors that present safety concerns, such as students bringing weapons to school, students engaging in gang activity, and students shooting other students. Therefore, school safety must become a cultural norm for students, parents, school staff, and the greater community.

When school safety becomes a part of the cultural norm, the stakeholders' actions and mindset about school safety will undergo an accordant shift. Along the way, it is imperative that all stakeholders have a shared vision. With a shared vision, the stakeholders can work collectively to build a consensus as to what behaviors are acceptable and what behaviors are not. The shared vision can also provide opportunities for stakeholders to work collaboratively toward a common goal, thus strengthening the stakeholders' bond and power. As for their common goal, it can be *creating a safe learning environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn*.

### Instructional Programming

To create safe learning environments, urban high schools need to implement effective instructional programming. Positive behavioral intervention and support (PBIS) is a decision-making framework that guides the selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes (Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support 2009). The utilization of PBIS emphasizes four elements: *data*, which is used to support decision making; *outcomes*, which support social competence and academic achievement; *practices*, which support student behavior; and *systems*, which support staff behavior. School-wide positive behavioral intervention and support schools organize their evidence-based behavior practices and systems into an integrated collection or continuum through which students experience supports based on their behavioral responsiveness to intervention (Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support 2009).

The intervention uses a three-tier system. At the primary tier, all students receive supports. If students are not responsive to the supports offered at the first tier, they are moved to the secondary tier where they receive additional supports in small-group settings. The final tier exists for the sake of administering tertiary pre-

vention. This tier works with students in one-on-one settings with highly individualized plans.

Urban high schools can use PBIS to address the behavioral concerns of at-risk students. Using PBIS would provide these schools with support systems at each grade level. In addition, this system ensures that all stakeholders are involved in the implementation process because the program uses a school-wide approach. In order for PBIS to be both efficient and effective, it is geared for all stakeholders to participate at various levels. This approach to participation reverberates to the students with the result that everyone expects them to meet the overall expectations.

Another way for urban high schools to combat safety concerns is by creating alternative settings for at-risk students. For example, the St. Louis Public Schools partnered with the 22nd Judicial Circuit Court Judge Jimmie Edwards, who created a school for at-risk students. This school functions as an alternative for students who have violated the Missouri Safe Schools Act. Judge Edwards created this alternative because Missouri's approach to compulsory education appalled him (Cooperman 2010). Most of the time, their at-risk students were on long-term suspensions, which is ironic given the fact that when students are suspended they are not in school, which puts the student at a greater risk of encountering trouble. With this in mind, Judge Edwards created a school with the intention of serving these students.

Innovative Concept Academy is the first community partnership school in the country overseen by a judge (Cooperman 2010). The school is an authentic community partnership. A total of 45 partners participate, ranging from state agencies to local universities to churches, philanthropists, and nonprofits, to name just a few.

It is evident that at-risk students can attend urban schools that are safe. School safety is a top priority. Needless to say, if the schools lack safety, then the students lack safety.

Urban high schools that create warm and welcoming environments in which teachers can teach, students can learn, and parents and community members collaborate in operational teams have shown success (Dryfoos 1996; Tough, 2009). These school systems do not accept the status quo. Such systems do not buy into the notion that the students come from tough neighborhoods and will therefore cause problems. What these systems do buy into is the fostering of academic and behavioral excellence. All members of the community know that school safety is vital, and that at-risk students deserve to be educated in safe and secure environments.

### Conclusions

Urban high schools can maintain safe learning environments for at-risk students. In order to maintain these environments, school leaders should engage in

system-wide consistency and site-based decision making. The following recommendations will work to enhance safe learning environments:

1. Set high expectations.
2. Model what is expected.
3. Conduct quarterly town hall meetings with the community, school, students, and parents.
4. Conduct quarterly grade-level meetings to review student discipline guidelines, and have students engage in small-group activities where they discuss and act out scenarios. Then have students problem solve and create behavioral action plans.
5. Make classroom activities meaningful and relevant to students' lives, culture, and future (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory 1996).
6. Create a positive school climate by fostering school pride and academic excellence and making safety the number one priority.
7. Provide ongoing job-embedded professional development for staff that encompasses school safety, culturally responsive teaching, and data analysis.
8. Create extracurricular activities before and after school for students to improve academic skills, modify behaviors, and encourage volunteerism in the community.
9. Create a parent room where parents can work in collaborative teams with parent facilitators. Facilitators

will provide parents with resources and tools that augment parental engagement. Activities can range from seminars on effective parenting techniques to classes on food preparation.

10. Implement an instructional program such as PBIS or character education to teach students expected behavioral norms.

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